

INTRODUCTION

If you want your business to be taken seriously online, you need a domain name. It's simply not good enough to operate a commercial website, no matter how small, with an address such as <http://freehomepages.isp.com/jimsmith>. Domains are incredibly cheap but instantly add professionalism to your website and email addresses.

In this month's *Business Help* we'll show you how to choose a suitable domain name, buy it and set it up. You will also find out what to look for in a domain name registration company, and how to avoid pitfalls that might only become apparent months after you've invested time and money in your new domain.

Even if you find yourself signed up to an inflexible system that doesn't allow you to do what you need with your domain, we'll show you how to get around these limitations and take control of your brand on the internet.

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Domain names

Even small companies can benefit from having a domain name that potential customers can find easily. **Simon Edwards** takes you through the process of choosing and buying a business URL

Q Our bakery, which specialises in patisserie, already has a simple website but we want to present a more professional face to the public. Currently, we are using the free web space provided by our ISP, so the web address, which starts <http://freespace.virgin.net>, does nothing for our brand. We're not a high-tech company, but we're a fair size and want a web address that reflects this.

As well as a good address, we'd like matching email addresses. How do we set this up? For the time being we don't need anything very powerful, but what sort of things should we look for in order to avoid problems if we expand the site later?

There seem to be lots of types of addresses, with the .com ones being the most impressive. Are there any disadvantages to having a .co.uk address? Also, are the .eu domains available yet?

Some general information about web hosting would be useful, too. For example, do we need to move our site from Virgin or can we leave it there and still have a good web address? Finally, how do



we find out if a web address is already taken and are there any rules? You can't choose just any name for a business so we're guessing it's the same for web addresses. It would be nice to try out lots of different options, so any help would be greatly appreciated.

Howard Unwin

A If you want a good web and email address, you need to buy an internet domain name. Choosing a domain name, and selecting who provides it, can be a lottery. There is small print aplenty, and a few legal issues that can trip you up later on.

Any successful business will tell you its brand is an incredibly valuable asset. Firms spend vast amounts of money building and protecting their brands, and they rarely change a brand once it is established. A domain name is part of the branding process and, luckily for you, it's one of the least expensive moves you can make to generate a global face for your business.

An internet domain name will be used as part of your website address and the email addresses of your employees. For example, Microsoft has registered the domain microsoft.com, so you would expect its website to be at www.microsoft.com and for Bill Gates' email address to be billg@microsoft.com.

You can do the same. If you register the domain name pastrypantry.co.uk, your website can appear at www.pastrypantry.co.uk and your company can use a bundle of email addresses including howard@pastrypantry.co.uk, sales@pastrypantry.co.uk and so on.

RULES AND LIMITATIONS

Choosing a domain name is remarkably simple, but the process generally works on a first-come, first-served basis, so finding a good name that has not yet been taken can be tricky. There are a few rules that you need to be aware of before you start. Some are technical limitations of the domain name system and others are set by the organisations that run the domain name registration services. We'll concentrate on domains that end in .co.uk.

There are some technical terms that will help you navigate domain registration companies' websites. The term domain name usually refers to the bit between the www. and the .co.uk bits of a web address. In our examples above, the domain names are microsoft and pastrypantry. The .com and .co.uk parts are called top-level domains (TLDs), although strictly speaking .co.uk

is a combination of a country code TLD (the .co bit) and a regular TLD (the .uk bit). In practice, though, you can treat .co.uk as a TLD.

The 'www' bit of a web address is the hostname and can be anything you want. You could use yummy as a hostname instead and have a website at <http://yummy.pastrypantry.co.uk>, but www is the standard choice for a web server and people expect it to be available.

Anyone can register and use any domain name, with a few exceptions. The most important rule is that you shouldn't register a domain that purposely copies another company's brand names. For example, imagine you run a fast food outlet called Simon's Kebabs that sells kebabs, burgers and chips. If you registered mcdonaldsburgers.co.uk (at the time of writing this domain name is still available, along with the .com version), you are asking for trouble from the McDonald's Corporation.

Never register a domain name with the intention of selling it at massive cost to a company that you think will need it. This is known as cyber-squatting, and you will end up in a court case that you will almost certainly lose. Don't let that scare you off buying a domain name, though. If you have a legitimate business and

PRICE LIST & INFO

Domain	Price
.co.uk	£2.95
.org.uk	£8.89
.biz	£8.89/year
.name	£8.89/year
.plk.uk	£2.95/year
.ltd.uk	£2.95/year
.tv	£30.99/year

Domain checker

It's easy to find your chosen domain name type!

www.

eg yourbizname

Check now!

Lookup Results

Domain Name	Availability
pastry.co.uk	Taken
pastry.org.uk	Available
pastry.co.uk	Available
pastry.com	Taken
pastry.org	Taken
pastry.net	Taken
pastry.info	Taken
pastry.biz	Taken
pastry.tv	Taken
pastry.ltd.uk	Available
pastry.plk.uk	Available

If you don't already have a UKreg account, simply sign up, to register domains at some of the UK's best prices!

SIGN UP NOW

▲ You can search for available domain names using the form on any domain registration website

▲ Basic services such as forwarding and email are configured using a web-based control panel

choose a domain that reflects its name or goals, you'll be fine.

There are also some technical limits to .co.uk domains, set down by Nominet, the organisation that runs the .uk domains. For a start, a .co.uk domain must be more than one and fewer than 64 characters long, including the .co.uk bit. Valid characters are limited to the 26 letters of the alphabet, the numbers zero to nine and hyphens, although you can't have a hyphen at the start or the end of the name. You can't have a domain name of two letters, although a combination of a letter and number is acceptable, as are two numbers. So your-business.co.uk and 17.co.uk would be fine, but 1.co.uk, yourbusiness-.co.uk and yb.co.uk would not.

Finally, you are not allowed to register a domain name that matches a TLD such as .com or .uk, or a secondary-level domain such as nhs or org. For example, you could not register uk.co.uk, .com.co.uk or .org.co.uk.

Nominet is pretty relaxed about who can register domain names under different TLDs. You might not be a non-profit organisation but you are allowed to register a domain under the org.uk TLD. However, the two exceptions are ltd.uk and plc.uk, which can be registered only by limited and public limited companies respectively.

CHECKING AND BUYING

Checking the availability of a domain could not be easier. Visit any domain registration website (any of the companies mentioned below will do) and you'll find a domain search box on the home page. Enter your choice of domain and TLDs and click the Search button. You should see a list comprising your chosen domain name and TLDs. Some may have already been registered, while others may be available. Repeat this with as many domain names as you want. Some sites will offer alternative domain names that look or sound similar to your choices.

COSTS

Registering a domain on its own, without any attendant services such as email and web hosting, is very cheap. Web firm 1&1 (www.1and1.co.uk) will sell you a .co.uk domain for £2.34 per year and UKreg (www.ukreg.com) charges £3.46. Both prices include VAT and both deals include email forwarding to existing email accounts and web forwarding to your site. Easily.co.uk and Namesco (www.names.co.uk) charge around £5 per year for a similar deal.

Watch out for companies that supply exactly the same features but charge a lot more. If you have been paying £25 per year for a .co.uk

domain, consider transferring to another registration company.

When you sign up for your .co.uk domain, the website might ask if you want to register similar domains with a .com suffix, or any number of other TLDs including the brand new .eu option. The main reason these companies give for buying lots of similar domains is that it prevents someone else from grabbing them and diverting business from you.

Ask yourself if you really need a .com domain. The regionalisation you get with a .co.uk domain is useful because it lets people know you are a UK business and not some unreachable

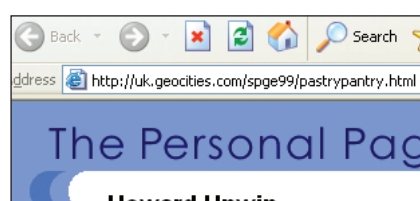
US company. But a .com address can make you seem bigger, and you can still indicate a UK bias using a sub-domain, which is similar to a hostname, or a subdirectory. For example, a website at uk.mydomain.com is clearly aimed at UK customers, as is one at www.mydomain.com/uk. This approach makes particular sense for companies that want to appear worldwide. A small shop will appear less corporate and more friendly if it simply goes for a .co.uk domain.

The cost of buying a .com domain is quite low, and you can expect to pay between £9 and £18 per year, depending on the company you choose. Some people think that a .com domain is more professional than its .co.uk counterpart, but that perception is outdated. If both options are available it makes sense to register each in turn, but don't worry if one is already taken.

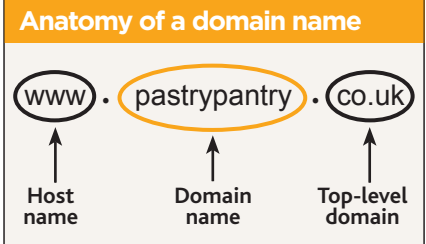
The .eu domain has just become available but, unless you intend to have a lot of dealings with European Union businesses and organisations, at present there seems little point in spending the best part of £10 a year on one.

BASIC SERVICES

Depending on which company you use to register your domain, you'll get a different package of features. Theoretically, a minimal domain service would register a domain for you and just update the DNS (domain name system) entries to associate this domain name with the IP addresses of your DNS, web and email servers. This is OK if you already have your own servers, but very few businesses do. Instead, most of us use an ISP or web-hosting company to provide our website and email needs. Domain registration companies recognise this, so the



▲ Web forwarding lets visitors type in a nice web address (top) and access your website. If URL masking isn't provided (bottom), they'll see the unprofessional-looking URL after redirection



practical minimum package includes DNS and web and email servers that forward all traffic and mail to the providers you already use.

Email forwarding typically allows you to set up to 50 virtual email accounts (otherwise known as aliases). Messages sent to these are forwarded to real email accounts that you will have set up with your ISP, Hotmail, Gmail or any of the other popular services available. When you reply, your email may appear to come from you@yourdomain.com or you@hotmail.com, depending on how you have set up your email client and the options provided by the service.

With web forwarding, you log into the domain company's system and add your website address, which could be the aforementioned <http://freehomepages.isp.com/jimsmith>. Visitors to www.pastrypantry.co.uk would be redirected to your home page. If URL masking is available, the web address in a visitor's address bar will be www.pastrypantry.co.uk, but if they hover over links they will see the real, ugly address. If URL masking is not offered, the unprofessional address will appear in the address bar as shown in the screenshot below.

Most domain registration companies provide website services for an extra charge. The main advantage of using the same company that provides your domain name is that the site will be properly hosted with your preferred domain name and links will appear with your domain name in place, too. Users can bookmark pages on your site and click through to other pages without ever seeing a nasty freehomepages-style web address.

TRANSFERRING YOUR DOMAIN

If you want to move your domain from one company to another, maybe because you have found a better price or more useful features somewhere else, you should have no problems.

Some firms will do all the work for you and, if you have a .uk domain, you might not have to pay anything until it becomes due for renewal. Most of the time you should expect to pay a registration fee for at least a year, even if you've already paid up with the previous company.

Sometimes it can be as easy as filling in a form on a website and answering a couple of emails. Other times you may have to download a form, print it on company-headed paper, fill it in and fax it. Before registering a domain, check in the small print for fees that the company might charge should you transfer your domain to another organisation. Avoid such companies. **CS**

Next month

NETWORK MANAGEMENT

System administrator tips to keep your company's PCs secure, up to date and backed up